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RECENT DISCOVERIES IN HONDURAS¹

By A. HOOTON BLACKISTON

MAN wherever his habitat or whatever the color of his skin at similar stages in his development has like wants and hence devises similar utensils and weapons. He at the same time evolves religious ideas strikingly akin to each other, and, in the primitive periods, peoples the air, the earth, and the sky with spirits and devils—some to be humored and propitiated, others to be appealed to by means of various forms and ceremonies. For these purposes caves have been used from the time when the first faint rays of dawning religion illumed the ignorance of prehistoric man almost down to the present day. Especially is the folk-lore of the American nations rich in this respect, and so little surprise will be evinced at the news of the recent discovery of a cave in Honduras strangely indicative of this character.

This was first found by an old Indian on one of his hunting trips in 1908 and the knowledge kept an inviolable secret until a few months ago owing to his total misconception of the nature of the find and the absence of the one man in whom he had confidence. Finally upon the return of his padrone he divulged the information that he had discovered an enormously rich mine abounding in a strange metal in the form of bells of many varieties. Thus this cave, containing probably the largest deposit of copper bells ever found on the American continent, first became known largely through chance.

It is situated far within the Honduran mountains upon an arroyo on the headwaters of a small stream flowing into the Rio Chamelcon, and about twenty-five miles distant from the ruins of the ancient city of Naco. Thick tropical vegetation guards its

¹ The writer desires to acknowledge his indebtedness to the courtesy of Captain William Owen, the American Vice-Consul General to Guatemala, and to Mr W. E. Alger, also of the American consular service, whose hospitality and whose knowledge of the country proved of the greatest assistance in all places and under all circumstances.

approach from every quarter, four machete men hacking and hewing at the tangled mass of vines and brush being necessary to cut a path which led through the dense jungle, across quicksands, along the beds of rushing streams and up the steep mountain side. Drenching rains and treacherous footing made access to it still more difficult. Once the writer's mule—a veteran of several revolutions who had borne his former owner to a minister's portfolio—slipped at the last moment down the mountain, after having swum rivers infested with alligators and climbed everything but a rope ladder. Fortunately a mass of tropical growth effectually stopped his further downward progress. But all difficulties and discomforts were quickly forgotten when, after struggling on foot to the deep and narrow arroyo, and sliding down its rocky side, the dim outlines of the cave loomed with almost startling suddenness upon the view. Hidden as it is by nature behind a dense screen of rocks and tangled tropical foliage it must have been the sheerest accident alone that led even an Indian to discover it.

The entrance is forty feet wide and contains what seems to be decided signs of copper stain on its walls, while in depth it extends fifty-six feet into the mountain, and decreases from twenty feet in height in the front portion to about four feet in the rear. It appears almost certain that it was never inhabited as the bottom slopes at an angle of forty-five degrees towards the mouth while there is further not the slightest evidence of building signs nor smoke stains. No pictographs are found on the walls nor on the nearby rocks and there also seems to be a total lack of *trincheras* or other similar works in the neighborhood.

The greatest interest therefore centers around the culture symbols which so excited the fears and hopes of the old Indian. He first found a few copper bells lying upon the surface, and later excavations revealed hundreds of specimens of all shapes and sizes from the most minute type to ones nearly three inches in diameter, and from plain, conventionally shaped ones to others highly artistic in design and construction (plate XLV). The most interesting examples are in the form of fanciful faces of men and eccentric shapes of animals. Among the finest are designs following the lines of a turtle with elongated neck bent backward to serve as a handle; one with a

face in which the chin and the nose are greatly exaggerated and prolonged as in our own caricatures of witches; others representing strange creatures akin to the dragon of romance curled around a well shaped bell, while great broad gnome-like faces in which the opening of the bell represents the mouth with two large teeth protruding, one on either side, are found in several instances and in others the form of grotesque bat heads—being varied in different specimens by the presence of horn-like ears upon the forehead, high ringed eyes and other typical idiosyncrasies—all carried out with consummate



FIG. 56. — Notable bell with faces of negroid and Mayan types.

skill and finish. One of the most notable specimens represents a flat negroid face with wide open mouth out of which protrudes another face of totally different type with large nose and staring eyes (fig. 56). There are also numberless bells formed like our sleigh bells, and smaller button-shaped ones each with a clear ringing note made by the ball of copper inserted as a clapper, and each having a separate tone. Indeed almost the entire scale may be run upon a number

of the bells. They all have a copper loop securely fastened on the back or top—some plain, others gracefully twisted and welded.

These bells are not only surprising in regard to their designs but are especially wonderful on account of the workmanship and technique displayed. There seems to be no doubt that many were cast in moulds: some have the appearance of having been beaten, or at least finished, in that manner, while others were built up of tier upon tier of finely spun wire, recurring scrolls and other running designs being superimposed in delicately shaped coils of copper. At times this latter method was applied to the whole bell, at others to



TYPES OF COPPER BELLS FROM CAVE

From Blackiston collection, U. S. National Museum.

the upper section only. The workmanship as a whole is characterized by a boldness of conception and design and a masterful treatment and finish that places it upon a plane distinctly by itself in the aboriginal work of this nature. The copper of which these bells are constructed contains gold in small quantities.

Over eight hundred specimens have been found, and even a number of pieces of native copper from three to seven inches in length out of which they were fashioned, also some strips of beaten copper not yet shaped into any form. Though, as already stated, portions of the cave bear a green stain that resembles copper, the mine from which the metal was taken is not in the immediate vicinity though a comparatively short distance away.

While the chief items of interest are undoubtedly the bells, a number of excellently shaped spear-points have been secured, one about ten inches long to which a portion of a petrified wooden haft was attached. Some beads of polished stone, a few shells of a snail that lives in a nearby stream, and a number of objects of a distinctly ceremonial or religious nature were likewise discovered here.

First in interest in the writer's collection is a large life-sized mask of white cedar which was covered with mosaics of turquoise and other stones set in a thick gum or pitch with which it was coated (plate XLVI). Three greatly elongated straight projections answer for the nose and the two lips. Holes were cut for the eyes and two small ones on the sides for the thongs which bound it to the head. A large cavity in the forehead was evidently the setting of the crowning stone of the collection though of what nature this was we unfortunately are unable to surmise as it evidently became loosened and dropped out years before its discovery. Along the sides of the face are depressions in the coating of gum for regularly shaped stones about half an inch long by three-eighths of an inch in width arranged in parallel rows—none of which remain at present. The rest of the surface, as noted, was covered with small turquoise mosaics, a number of which are in place today.

An idol about eight inches high carved out of *palo negro* (ebony) was also found in the cave. It contains two faces, one above the other, the upper one being the better and facing directly forward while the lower is characterized by a large curved nose and is turned

towards the left—one side of the face being drawn as if in a smile or grimace. A tiger head was carved on its back. Below the faces the neck was indefinitely projected to serve as a handle or a fastening into the body of an idol of more perishable material—probably the former.

Another face of hard white stone one and a half inches long with a hole in the top, was also found. With the possible exception of the mussel shells alluded to, which might very readily have been an intrusive product of a later date, there were no signs of domestic occupancy—no wall lines, no bones, no potsherds, no charred embers—only objects of ceremonial use.

It is therefore very evident that this cave was used solely for religious purposes by a people who were well versed in the working of metal and the lapidary's art—accomplishments which in the course of human development have come only when a nation has been able to attend to the primal wants of man—food, clothing, and habitation, and has consequently advanced many strides along the course of civilization.

Its propinquity to the site of ancient Naco, the richness of the culture symbols, and the apparent absence of all nearby ruins would suggest the possibility of a connection with the inhabitants either of that city or at least of the nation of which it was the capital.

While much of the work has a distinctly individual tone the majority shows a decided Mayan influence in feature and treat-

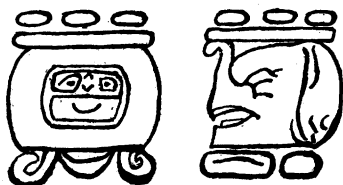
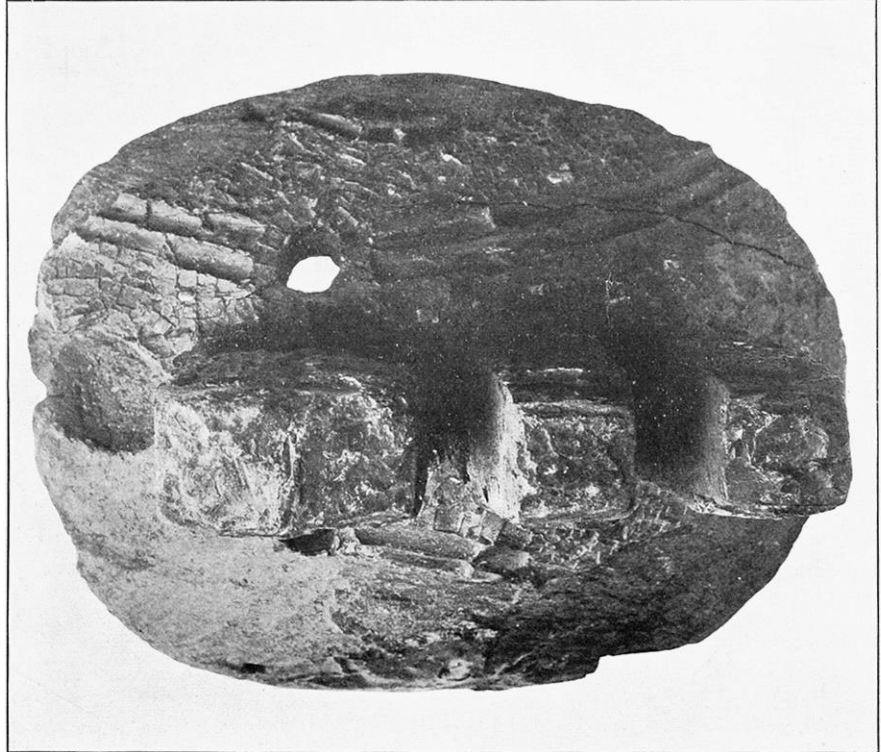


FIG. 57.—Mayan symbol of the bat god.

ment, and the presence of native copper in the cave indicates that the bells were probably made there. It seems extremely probable that we have here come in contact with the worship of the Mayan bat god, the deity of mountain caverns (see fig. 57). Not only do

some of the bells resemble a bat's head, but it will be remembered that Zotziha Chimalcan—the Cakchiquel god who controlled fire and who was represented by a bat (zotz) was a god of darkness and of caves,—and that Zotziha, “the bat's house,” was one of the regions which confronted those who travelled to the kingdom of



a



b

LIFE-SIZE CEREMONIAL MASK ORIGINALLY INLAID WITH TURQUOISE
a, front view ; b, side view From Blackiston collection, U. S. National Museum.

death in the depths of the earth, where dwelt Cama-Zotz, "the Death Bat," "the Destroyer," who bit off the head of the brave Hunahpu when he descended into the lower world.

Indeed of such prominence was the worship of this god of the caves and the under-world that the name of a division of the Cakchiquels, the Zotzil tribes ("bat people"), was derived from it—and also the name of another clan that lived near the border between Honduras and Guatemala. It seems therefore likely that the rites which were celebrated in this cave were a southern extension or development of those in honor of Zotziha Chimalcan.

As regards the age of the specimens there is of course much uncertainty—the state of the woodwork of the mask and its general condition would seem to denote a fairly remote antiquity, while the bells and the petrified spear-haft point in the same direction.

It may safely be said that these bells have been silent through the centuries, at least since the Spaniard first conquered the New World, awaiting in their gloomy shrine the distant coming of the old Indian to awaken them again to life. How much farther back they extend it is impossible to state. The priests have gone, the weird rites too have long been forgotten, and even the ruins of the cities of the worshippers have disappeared, yet the bells remain—to greet in the voice of the Past the ever changing Present.

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